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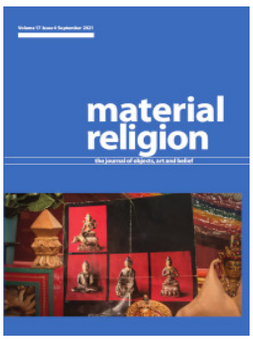

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negotiating the sounds of born-again christianity: aesthetic provocations in western ethiopia

yotam gidron

durham university, uk

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of hymns and musical practices in the articulation of Christian subjectivities among Nuer communities in western Ethiopia. It examines how the members of two fundamentalist born-again groups responded to the Pentecostalization of the local Christian soundscape over the past two decades, focusing on the distinct approaches they adopted for the production and performance of hymns and the authorization of Christian music. Born-again musical practices, it is argued, take shape through a constant process of public argumentation, fuelled by a ceaseless quest for divine authenticity. Believers from different churches are therefore engaged not in destructive conflicts over the domination of public spaces, as some accounts of tensions over religious sound from elsewhere in Africa may suggest, but in constant provocations and debates that are both of a productive nature and inherent to the endless political project of born-again subjectivation.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Nuer, Pentecostalism, Seventh-day Adventism, Messianic Judaism, sound

Yotam Gidron recently completed his PhD in Durham University's Department of History, where he researched Nuer law and religious life in the Ethiopian-South Sudanese borderlands. He has also written about different aspects of Israel's involvement in Africa in the past and present and is the author of *Israel in Africa: Security, Migration, Interstate Politics* (Zed Books, 2020).
yotamgidron@gmail.com

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The enthusiastic engagement of contemporary African born-again movements with new technologies of communication, and the extent to which these movements deploy media to extend their influence into, and remake, the public realm, have attracted considerable scholarly attention (e.g. De Witte 2003; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Meyer 2010b, 2015; De Witte 2012; Pype 2012). Sound and music are part of these trends, playing an important role in the "sensational appeal" and public presence of African Pentecostalism, particularly in urban locales (Kalu 2010; Meyer 2010a, 742). Loud prayers and preaching, nightly vigils and live religious music are common features of contemporary urban soundscapes in many parts of Africa, and scholars have described the tensions that often evolve between charismatic Christians and "traditionalists" or Muslims due to these interventions (Van Dijk 2001; De Witte 2008; Larkin 2014). However, debates over sound and music also take place between Christian groups. And as Grant (2018, 58) demonstrates in a recent analysis of Pentecostal and Catholic understandings of sound and silence in Rwanda, exploring these debates offers "new ways of understanding how Pentecostal churches define their boundaries, and how other kinds of Christians push back against them."

This article examines the role of musical practices and sonic mediation in the articulation of Christian subjectivities and communities in a peri-urban settlement called Newland, which is located in the town of Gambella in western Ethiopia and is dominated by Nuer speakers. Drawing on a year of ethnographic research in Gambella,[1] I examine how members of two fundamentalist churches – the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Church of God (Seventh Day) – responded to the Pentecostalization of Nuer Protestant hymnody over the past two decades. One purpose of this article is to contribute to the discussion on born-again aural mediation, and the limited scholarship on born-again Christianity in contemporary Ethiopia and South Sudan, by presenting an ethnographic account of the changing soundscapes of Nuer Christianity and examining the different "semiotic ideologies" (Keane 2007) that inform the musical practices Nuer churches have developed. But what the particular example of Gambella's Christian soundscapes demonstrates more broadly, I believe, is also how born-again musical practices take shape not as a solitary exercise of distinct groups but through a constant process of argumentation that is fuelled by the unending born-again quest for divine authenticity and indexicality.

My interest in the musical practices of churches in Newland emerged due to what I understood to be a salient preoccupation among Nuer in Gambella with deception. Urban areas in this part of Africa, which commonly developed out of colonial military outposts, have long been "frontiers of knowledge" – places where one ventures to engage with new actors and acquire new skills (Leonardi 2013). But the encounter with "development," money,

markets, written documents and educated foreigners (*turuɔni*) has also consistently been experienced among Nuer as a perilous and potentially humiliating encounter with manipulative and deceptive forces (Hutchinson 1996). Thus, the ideal "town boy" (*gat rɛk*) is still commonly imagined today among Nuer in Gambella as someone who is so smart and sophisticated that he is undeceivable, and yet also as someone that others may view as a threatening crafty trickster (*wän wän*). The urban, "modern" world is one of wisdom, but also of deception and "bluffing" (Newell 2012). When engaging with it, especially in a place like Gambella where people are acutely aware of their own marginalization and peripherality, one always feels at risk of being duped with false information, fake commodities and misleading performances (Gidron 2020b, 80-87).

Born-again churches, with their emphasis on divine truth and authenticity, are entangled in these anxieties over knowledge and trickery. If engagement with commodities, modern education and the state places one under the constant risk of being deceived and getting "confused" or "lost" (*bath*), born-again discourses, styles and aesthetics in Gambella, as elsewhere, promise a sense of epistemological and moral certainty, grounded in absolute divine truth (cf. Blunt 2004; Marshall 2009). Being a "proper" Christian means being "on top of it" in an environment rife with confusion and threats of deception. However, the promise of epistemological certainty is not one that can be easily fulfilled, at least not until the Second Coming of Christ, when divine truth is finally revealed with absolute clarity. Until then, Nuer born-again Christians in Gambella (again, as fellow believers elsewhere) are "locked … in ceaseless struggle with the threat of falsity, counterfeit, doubt" (Comaroff 2015, 222), with their faith thus reinforcing the same anxieties over trickery it promises to solve. The production, circulation and consumption of music is one arena in which this ceaseless struggle unfolds. On the one hand, this media represents the promise of truth through divine immediacy – the possibility of feeling, and being with, the divine. On the other hand, it represents the threat of confusion and satanic deception. How to make sure one uses it properly is an open question, and a hotly debated one.

The materiality of sound is difficult to pin down. While the focus of this article is on hymns, the discussion takes into account, more broadly, the practices, styles, objects and experiences associated with the production of music and the acts of singing and listening (cf. Weiner 2011). Ultimately, then, the concern here is with the aesthetics or "sensational forms," as Meyer calls them (2009, 2010a, 2011), that render the divine perceptible and bind believers together in various religious contexts. The Christian groups discussed here are all evangelical Protestants, they all aspire to project their influence into the wider community, and they all deploy songs and music in order to do so, and in order to cultivate faithful subjects, delineate

religious spaces and articulate religious communities. However, each of them advocates for a different approach to the use of sound, music and songs, grounded in a different understanding of the ways in which divine authority and truth are materialized and made intelligible to humans. In the dense peri-urban space, their different aesthetics and aspirations constantly come into contact, but this does not necessarily lead to any open hostility, and certainly not to violence. What it does constitute, is a dynamic public sphere, which transcends the boundaries of any specific church, in which values, ideals and truth claims are constantly debated.

It is for this reason, I think, that approaching the dynamics described in this article as "conflicts," "battles," or "clashes" (De Witte 2008; Oosterbaan 2009; Grant 2018) will fail to capture their political and religious significance. What it will obscure is the fact that being born-again is *always* a continuous project of "pushing back" against other aesthetic regimes, Christian or otherwise. As Marshall (2009, 11) argues in her work on Pentecostalism in Nigeria, born-again "regimes of practice" take shape through "ongoing agonistic interaction with other regimes and traditions." This is also why comparisons, critique and the "critical positionings of collectives and selves" are central in born-again life (Handman 2014). Believers in Newland, this article argues, are not engaged in destructive conflicts, but rather, in constant debates and provocations that are both of a productive nature and inherent to the endless political project of born-again subjectivation. Before turning to the Pentecostalization of Nuer Christianity and the competing musical practices of members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Church of God, however, the article opens with a short introduction to Newland and its churches.

Nuer Christianity in the Peri-Urban Periphery

Gambella town, the capital of Gambella regional state, is situated more than 700 km from Addis Ababa, beyond an escarpment, in one of the least developed or accessible parts of Ethiopia, near the South Sudanese border. Nuer speakers are the largest "indigenous" group in Gambella region, followed by Anywaa speakers. Both had migrated into the region before the Ethiopian state first claimed its authority over it in the early twentieth century. Anywaa used to be the majority in Gambella but have been overtaken by Nuer in recent decade, and bursts of violence between these two communities have occurred repeatedly over the past century due to tensions over demographic dominance and access to resources and political power. This has gradually led to segregation between them, with each group inhabiting its own spaces in Gambella town and region at large. There are therefore remarkably few churches in which Nuer and Anywaa worship together, and each group has its own separate institutions, music and hymnody. Hence my reference here to "Nuer Christianity."

Newland emerged as an informal settlement at the eastern edge of Gambella town sometime in the 1970s. Since then, and against the background of violence and displacement in neighboring Sudan (and since 2011, South Sudan), it has attracted many students, refugees, government workers, and their families, who came from rural Ethiopia and South Sudan to reside at the edge of the town. Education is most commonly cited as the main reason bringing people to the neighborhood, while employment is usually sought in the civil service or humanitarian agencies. Though located in a peripheral region with poor infrastructure and limited connectivity, over the past two decades, Newland has emerged as an important global hub, linking those rural Nuer communities of the Ethiopian-South Sudanese borderlands with diaspora communities across East Africa and as far as the US and Australia, where considerable numbers of Nuer have been resettled as refugees since the 1990s. As such, it is also the most important hub of Nuer Christianity in the region, where the headquarters or main branches of most churches are found. There are no Anywaa living in Newland today, although the area was the site of an Anywaa village in the past.

I refer to Newland as a peri-urban space to emphasize its position as a space that straddles – in terms of the legal institutions governing it, its economy, its infrastructure, its popular culture and styles – the imaginary boundary between the "rural" and the "urban" (Trefon 2009). Most of Newland's residents live in huts or mud houses, in compounds that are only loosely demarcated. If they are separated from one another at all, it is usually by dilapidated tin or wooden fences that are rather easily crossed by animals, humans, and, crucially in the context of this paper, sounds. The ever-expanding neighborhood is dense at its older heart and sparser at its ever-expanding edges. Many of Newland's residents receive some financial support from relatives in the diaspora, and this support plays an important role in providing capital for the establishment of small businesses, the construction of houses and the maintenance of churches. At the same time, they are also usually dependent on relatives in rural areas, since this is where cattle, crucial for securing marriages, are maintained. As we shall see, this hybridity of the peri-urban space – its simultaneous marginality and global connectivity – also impacts the way local Christian styles and identities are negotiated and articulated, with inspiration and influence flowing from various directions and sources, near and far.

An American Presbyterian mission was first established in colonial southern Sudan, across the border from Gambella in the town of Nasir, in 1912. Few Nuer converted before the 1960s, but in the following decades Protestant Christianity spread and became a community-wide religion. Seventh-day Adventism reached the region from the Ethiopian highlands in the early 1970s, and until the 1990s, most Christian Nuer in Gambella

were either Presbyterians or Adventists. However, starting from the late 1990s, there was a surge in the number of Nuer Protestant churches. Following the fall of the socialist Derg regime, Ethiopia's religious space opened up, allowing Protestant churches and missionaries to operate in the country with fewer restrictions than ever before. At the same time, following the commencement of refugee resettlement programs, which relocated South Sudanese from Ethiopia and Kenya to the US, Nuer refugees began to link relatives in Gambella with evangelical American churches. This opened up new avenues for international support and incentivized the establishment of numerous new churches. Meanwhile, the spread of Pentecostal teachings encouraged local entrepreneurs to establish their own independent churches, relying on local resources and support.

Most new evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal churches in Gambella were established by members who "defected" from the Presbyterian Church (organized, in Gambella, under the umbrella of the Ethiopian evangelical church Mekane Yesus). However, a parallel strand of Sabbatarian churches emerged among Nuer as well, comprising of fundamentalist groups that split, since the late 1990s, from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Adventist Nuer refugees who lived in Kakuma camp in northern Kenya joined the Church of God (Seventh Day), a Zionist millenarian church, in the late 1990s.[2] Some of them returned to Gambella and established branches of this church among the Nuer. Over the past decade, this church split into multiple other Sabbatarian Zionist groups, some of whom established links with Messianic Jewish and evangelical Zionist organizations in Israel and the US as well. Due to their observance of Mosaic Law and Jewish festivals, members of these groups in Gambella often refer to themselves as "Messianic Jews," a title I use to refer to them here as well.[3] Like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of God is a remnant church whose members view themselves as God's faithful end-time people and consider the doctrines of other churches to be false and misleading.

Christian hymn-singing was first introduced to Nuer communities in this region by American Presbyterian missionaries. However, there was already a long history of Nuer spiritual activity and knowledge being centered around the circulation of songs. In particular, songs played an important role in the activities of the Nuer prophets that came to prominence in the late nineteenth century, and it was through songs that the achievements and prophesies of these individuals were broadcasted, remembered and reinterpreted (Johnson 1994, 101). Initially, Christian hymns were translated into the Nuer language at the mission in Nasir, but gradually Nuer Christians began writing original hymns, a practice that significantly increased throughout Sudan's Second Civil War (1983–2005). Ultimately, Christian hymns came to form a rich collective archive – not only an abstract one, carefully maintained in the memory of the

communities that created it, but also a physical one, as many songs were written down and compiled in hymnals. The latest version of the Nuer hymnal, which is probably just as widely disseminated and cherished in Newland as the Nuer Bible itself, was published by the Evangelical Covenant Church of South Sudan in 2010 and includes no less than 749 hymns composed and translated over several generations. Adventists and Messianics, as further discussed below, do not use these songs, and instead have developed their own separate hymnals.

Access to electricity and the internet is limited in Gambella, and it is primarily the creation, performance and circulation of songs that dominates religious life until today, across all churches. The rising popularity of some Nuer pop and hip-hop artists in other East African countries notwithstanding, "church songs" (*diit luak kuɔth*) – or God praising songs (*diit puɔnyä kuɔth*) – are by far the most popular musical genre among Nuer in Gambella. Few houses in Newland possess televisions, and there are no clubs in the neighborhood where live non-religious music is played. Religious hymns therefore are not only sung by devoted members in church on Sunday or Saturday, or during the remarkably popular church conferences Newland regularly hosts (Figures 1 and 2). They are also sung by children and women at home, listened to by student and youths as they read, work or relax by the river, and are regularly played in Newland's

FIG 1
A poster advertising a conference in Christian Temple Church, Newland. Photo by author.

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FIG 2
A poster advertising a youth conference in the Church of the Nazarene, Newland. Photo by author.

restaurants. Any smartphone or old laptop in the neighborhood has a collection of church songs saved on its memory – some more professionally produced, others casually recorded in church – and these files spread quickly through Bluetooth and flash drives.

The Pentecostalization of Nuer Hymnody

For decades, most Nuer churches used drums, or no instruments at all, during services. Since the mid-2000s, however, synthesizers became increasingly popular, dramatically transforming the soundscapes of Nuer Christianity. Ironically, it was no other than the Catholic Church that facilitated this revolution. As opposed to Nuer communities living west of the Nile in South Sudan, whose homelands fell under the responsibility of Catholic missionaries in colonial Sudan, the Catholic Church had very little influence among Nuer living along the Sudan-Ethiopia borderlands. A Catholic Church was established in Gambella only in the late 1990s, following the activities of a Catholic humanitarian organization in the area, and Catholicism remains marginal among Nuer in the region. In any case, in the early 2000s, the Catholic Church opened a youth center in Gambella town. Among other things, the center offered training in playing the synthesizer.

From the small group of Nuer who first learned how to play the instrument at the youth center, the knowledge spread quickly. Since synthesizers are relatively expensive and require electricity or at least a portable battery, and ideally also amplifiers, many small churches cannot afford them and continue to use drums, particularly in rural areas. It is generally more difficult for churches to obtain a synthesizer (and the resources required to operate it) than to find a devoted member with at least some basic knowledge and will to play it. All major churches in Newland possess synthesizers, however, and some even have a small generator to make sure power cuts do not interfere with their operation during services. Both the availability of these instruments in church and the knowledge of how to play them index a certain degree of global connectivity and sophistication that is attractive in and of itself. What makes their sonic qualities appealing, however, is not only their volume but their auto-accompaniment feature, which allows DJs (as they are often called) to play the melody of a hymn while being accompanied by the synthesizer's automatic background "band," including a set of drums and percussion.

The amplified electronic beats of synthesizers have become the paradigmatic aural mark of Nuer Protestantism. Pounding across Newland on weekends and during church conferences, they have a magnetic quality that allows them to mold together believers while also enabling individual experiences of spiritual empowerment and healing. Singing and dancing in church, after all, are personal matters, relating to one's relationship with God. A Pentecostal friend with whom I occasionally attended Sunday services once told me that in church he feels that he is "dancing with the Holy Spirit." And yet, such individual spiritual interactions are only made possible due to the wholesome sensory experiences generated by one's presence in a certain sound-filled space, often also intensely decorated with colorful fabrics, lights and objects, with other believers (Figure 3). Church choirs, when performing, operate in harmony not only through the collective act of singing and their uniforms, but also through repetitive rhythmic movements of the body, with the irresistible beats of the synthesizer drawing the audience in as well (Figures 4 and 5).

The rise of these aesthetics has not been uncontested, with elders and critics (including the Adventists and Messianics discussed below) often complaining that youths have turned churches into sites of entertainment and social activity. In the past, dry-season celebrations known as *dom-piny* were important occasions for courtship among Nuer communities. In these events, youths gathered to sing and dance throughout the night to the sounds of the *dom-piny* – a unique instrument constructed especially for the occasion. A hole was dug in the ground and covered with the skin of a cow, and then a cord was stretched over it, tied to two cattle-pegs on each side of the animal's skin and held above it by a stick, like the bridge of a

FIG 3
Christian Temple Church on a Sunday morning. Photo by author.

FIG 4
Youth choir of the Church of the Nazarene from Pugnido Refugee Camp performing in a conference in Newland. Photo by author.

FIG 5
Children's choirs performing in an ecumenical Christmas event in Newland. Photo by author.

violin. Two people then played the *dom-piny* – one hitting the cord with a stick and one beating the skin with his hand – as youths danced and chanted around it (Tucker 1933, 13-18). These parties lost their popularity by the 1970s, but as far as many elders are concerned, contemporary church conferences, with the beats of the synthesizers and enthusiastic dances of youths, came to replace them. "Today, instead of *dom-piny* they play in the churches," one elder in Newland, himself a Presbyterian, once told me. "They meet and then they steal themselves to play sex. No one can control them! It is the same. Instead of *dom-piny* they make a conference in church."

Over the past two decades, disagreements over music and practices such as dancing, speaking in tongues, shouting, ululating or crying have often led to defections from churches and to the establishment of new movements and institutions. While numerous small Pentecostal churches have emerged in Gambella since the early 2000s, the most prominent Nuer Pentecostal church, also famous for its cutting-edge use of lively gospel music, has been Christian Temple Church. Formerly known as Crusaders Church, Christian Temple was established by Nuer Presbyterian students who resided in Addis Ababa in the 1990s and were inspired by a Pentecostal worship center in the Ethiopian capital affiliated with the International

Ministries of Prophetic and Apostolic Churches Together (IMPACT). The church spread quickly through Gambella, into South Sudan and consequently opened branches among Nuer communities in Uganda, Kenya and Sudan as well. If other Nuer churches initially sought to restrain Pentecostal practices and even punished dissenting members, Christian Temple carried the Pentecostal flag with pride. "We demonstrate the Holy Spirit," its founder, Simon Deng, told me. "It is a hot church." Ultimately, most Protestant churches came to tolerate the gradual Pentecostalization of their services too, not least because they did not want to keep losing members.

Crucially, one reason that church elders have been unable to control the spread of Pentecostal aesthetics is that the role of music in forging Christian subjectivities and communities is not limited to the church halls, and neither is the production of Christian media under the exclusive authority of any church. Following the proliferation of synthesizers and computers, a few small and rather basic recording studios were also established in Newland, mostly run by youths who learned how to operate recording, mixing and editing equipment elsewhere in East Africa or in Addis Ababa. A small local industry of music production therefore emerged in recent years, as artists began to record gospel music (Figure 6). This industry is not particularly lucrative, and studios struggle to survive. However, the songs they produce are remarkably popular across Nuer communities in the region. Dominating this industry are singers associated with Christian Temple Church, who invest a great deal of energy and resources in producing recordings and video clips, often using studios outside Gambella as well, and whose songs are the most widely circulated among Nuer communities in East Africa and the diaspora.

Newland's Christian public sphere is therefore upheld through a range of daily practices and personal engagements with objects and technologies that make the production and circulation of media possible in the first place. One member of Christian Temple Church described to me how he decided to join the church after he was very sick and underwent an operation. Once his "heart started to love God," he not only broke up with his multiple girlfriends but revised the playlist on his mobile phone:

> I joined the church, and I delete everything. Because my phone… I had different kinds of music. I can write even all the artists, I can list them, more than 100 names, like, Lil Romeo, Lil Kim, Lil Mama, Lil Wayne. I know their names. I can list them. Because I hear their music all day. When I heard the preaching that God does not need all those things, I just delete them. Even all the pornography, I delete them, and also, I delete the sex films, because I have them on my phone at the time. And then I put only the songs of God.

Listening to recordings and gospel music is a common practice of individual self-fashioning that complements the

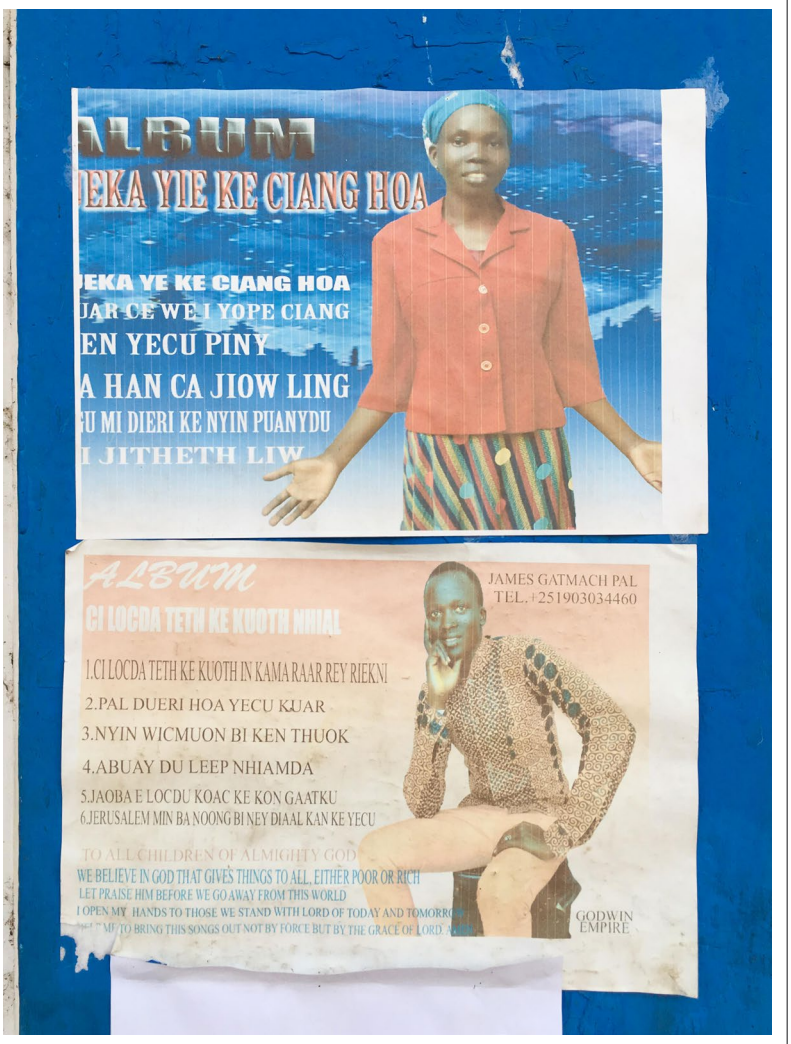

FIG 6
Advertisements for new locally produced gospel music outside the Church of the Nazarene in Newland. Photo by author.

activities undertaken collectively in the church. But it also opens up new platforms for debating and comparing aesthetics and practices between believers from different churches, while drawing inspiration from a whole range of stylistic inputs from across the region and world. For even though churches may have some degree of control over the materials circulating among members – youths spend hours practicing songs and instruments in church throughout the week, and during services, many pull out their phones to record songs and sermons (Figures 4, 7, and 10), in order to listen to them later, at home – it is far from a monopoly. Many Nuer youths study in Ethiopian universities outside Gambella, particularly in the southern and southwestern parts of the country and in Addis Ababa, where evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal churches flourish. Smartphones and laptops in Newland, meanwhile, are also filled with aural and visual fragments from much further

afield. Clips and songs – from Kenyan, Nigerian and South African to American and South Korean Pentecostal music and sermons – are regularly shared between friends or downloaded, when possible, from the internet. Consuming these materials not only shapes local styles and weaves them into a transnational digital landscape of spiritual activity but also creates a platform for believers to negotiate their born-again identity outside the institutional authority of any specific church.

Adventists and the Sounds of the Self-Possessed Christian

Not all churches have succumbed to the appeal of Pentecostal aesthetics in Gambella. Just as Adventists and Messianics set themselves apart from the wider Nuer Protestant community through their church institutions, day of worship, doctrines and the holidays they celebrate (or avoid), they also constantly work to uphold the boundary between themselves and "the world" (all other "Sunday churches" included) through the media they engage with and the aesthetics they deem legitimate. While all "Sunday churches" use more or less the same songs and the same hymnal, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Church of God have each developed its own separate collection of hymns and separate musical practices and styles, thus excluding themselves from the communal archive shared by most of Newland's residents and the Nuer "nation" at large. Their members are not unfamiliar with the songs of "Sunday churches." Many of them were previously members of such churches themselves, and even if not, these songs are so popular that it is unlikely that anyone growing up in a Nuer community will not know them. But these songs have no place in their worship programs.

The demonization of all musical genres that may arouse passion or unruly excitement – from Western and African popular music, through lively Pentecostal church songs to the use of drums – is a salient theme in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Popular music is associated with sexual promiscuity and moral ills. Drums, upbeat rhythms, and dance moves that resembled "traditional" Nuer ones (namely, jumping), are associated with "paganism." Both represent Satan's seduction – the dangerous realm of passion, irrationality and loss of control. The point has been expressed by the most influential Adventist leader, Ellen G. White, in a text she originally wrote in 1901 in reaction to the ecstatic worshipping practices a group of Seventh-day Adventists in the United States had adopted. "The Holy Spirit never reveals itself in such methods, in such a bedlam of noise," she wrote ([1958] 2017, 37). "This is an invention of Satan to cover up his ingenious methods for making of none effect the pure, sincere, elevating, ennobling, sanctifying truth for this time." Some Messianics in Gambella, particularly if they were previously Adventists, also subscribe to these views.

Seventh-day Adventists in Newland do not rule out the use of synthesizers altogether, but these are not widely used in their

churches. While in the past Nuer Adventist in Gambella used drums, throughout the early 2000s they adopted the adungu – a type of harp made of wood, traditionally used by communities in the southern parts of South Sudan and northern Uganda (Figure 7). There are different sizes of adungu used in Adventist churches in Gambella. The bass is the largest and can only be used with the instrument placed on the floor and the player sitting next to it. Smaller versions of the instrument can be played either standing, with the arms supporting the adungu, or sitting, with the adungu placed on one's knees. The thumb and forefinger of both hands are used to play the instruments (see also Bishop 2020, 107). The Seventh-day Adventist hymnal includes more than 500 songs, mostly locally written but also translated from the official Adventist hymnal and from Arabic. Translated hymns are sung with their original calm, slow and harmonious melodies, while the music of songs written by Nuer Adventists are commonly composed in a similar style and using similar Western scales and chord progression patterns, thus allowing skilled adungu players to support various hymns using the same chords. As opposed to the synthesizer, which requires a single player, the size of Adventist adungu bands is flexible.

While it is recognized that the adungu is a "traditional" African (though not Nuer) instrument, it was not deemed unsuitable for producing Christian music. On the contrary, both the sounds it produces and the act of playing it reflect, necessitate and cultivate the sensibilities and traits Adventists emphasize as essential to the true born-again believer and a proper Christian community. First, one's skills as an adungu player are a good index for self-discipline and commitment to the church, for a competent adungu player (and these are predominantly but not exclusively male) has clearly spent a great amount of time patiently practicing the instrument and honing his skills. Church members often meet during the week to practice sets

FIG 7
Adventist youths playing adungus in Eden Seventh-day Adventist Church, Newland. Photo by author.

of chords for hours, and there is therefore a great deal of social activity surrounding the use of the instrument. Second, adungu bands are not amplified, something that significantly impacts the architecture of the Adventist intervention in Newland's soundscapes. If the echoes of "Sunday churches" spread across the neighborhood indiscriminately, hitting whomever they come across whether they like it or not (cf. Larkin 2014), the sounds of Adventist worshipping rarely extends beyond the halls of the church, requiring believers to consciously tune in. These differences also impact the way the human voice is deployed by believers. Singing against the background of the amplified synthesizer, worshippers need to shout, recruiting the entire body for the task. Adventists, on the other hand, opt for a soft, reflective voice.

All this should not suggest, however, that Adventist songs and sounds do not leave a mark on Newland's soundscapes or that they do not recruit the bodies of believers and bond them through collective affective experiences. They do, but in ways that constantly uphold a line between them and "the world," through styles and aesthetics that cultivate and project self-possession, calmness and patience. Of course, no dancing ever takes place in Seventh-day Adventist churches. When singing, Adventists usually stand straight. For special events, children and youths practice military-like marching drills, which they present wearing uniforms (Figure 8). It is also with this aesthetic regime that Adventists seek to expand into the public sphere.

FIG 8
Adventist Pathfinders marching during an event in Olive Church, Newland. Photo by author.

During evangelization campaigns, members march the streets of Newland (Figure 9), taking over public spaces not with sensational electronic beats but as an army, the army of Christ, in which little to no space is left for unsupervised expressions of emotion and which random spectators cannot spontaneously join. While certainly not violent, this can nonetheless be understood as a rather explicit provocation that challenges the wild and exuberant Pentecostal encroachment into the public sphere.

Returning to the struggle against counterfeit and doubt with which this article began, we can see that the electric beats of the amplified synthesizer, the quiet melodies of the adungu and the wider set of practices associated with them, represent opposing understandings of the ways in which the divine is made present and of the sensibilities, sensorial practices and virtues the "true" born-again must cultivate. The Pentecostal prioritization of loud electric instruments and sensorial "heat" is based on the view of "passion as … a force that evades dissipation or corruption because it is unmediated by conscious manipulation or control" (Comaroff 2015, 241-42). Spontaneity and excitement imply divine authenticity, indexing the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Adventist emphasis on self-possession and tranquility is based on the diametrically opposed view: uncontrolled emotions, passion and enthusiasm are the forces through which Satan recruits human bodies and souls, and thus only the ongoing, meticulous suppression of these can keep one close to God. Pentecostals, with their ecstatic practices and loud music, have simply been "confused" by false doctrines.

Messianics: Singing the Word of God

Church of God members are not as preoccupied as Adventists with the satanic nature of music. Despite the fact that the Church of God was originally established in Gambella by Nuer who defected from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, its members today are generally open to the deployment of much more upbeat tunes when they praise. They regularly use drums and clap when singing, for instance, have embraced the use of synthesizers, and even if they do not dance as wildly as some Pentecostals do, they also do not rule out the practice altogether. As opposed to Adventists, they do not view music, including lively or more "traditional" and "African" beats and melodies, as intrinsically satanic. Their position puts greater emphasis on the agency and attitude of worshippers: "Sunday" Christians, they argue, are not genuinely trying to praise God but rather to impress others and attract attention. Their gatherings are merely social events which youths attended in order to "show off" with their new suits, dresses and dance moves or to find a romantic partner. "Have you ever been to Youth Malä?" one Messianic asked me, referring to the activities of a popular Nuer ecumenical organization that regularly holds large lively

FIG 9
Adventist children marching in Newland's main street as part of a Total Membership Involvement (TMI) evangelization campaign. Photo by author.

youth conferences in Gambella. "Sunday churches nowadays are fashion places."

Despite the explicit rejection of the overt public visibility of "Sunday Churches," singing plays a central role in binding people together through a range of daily practices and collective affective experiences in the Church of God. Every program in the Church – Friday evening, both Sabbath morning sessions, and Sabbath afternoon – begins and ends with shared congregational songs and prayers. On Sabbath, after a long Bible lesson in the morning, church groups (children, youths, and women) also sing in front of the congregation, and church conferences are almost entirely dedicated to collective praising (Figure 10). Most congregational songs are from the Church of God hymnal, which includes more than 500 songs, though newer ones are also regularly introduced, particularly by the children and youth groups. Some members have a copy of the hymnal, often worn-down. Some have it on their smartphones. Most know the songs, at least those commonly sung in church, by heart. Some children and youths carry with them small notebooks to write the words of new songs and memorize them (Figure 11). During the week and on Sabbath mornings, children are taught songs through repetition: guided by a youth, they sit together and repeat each sentence of a song again and again, only continuing

FIG 10
Children praising during a Church of God conference. Photo by author.

FIG 11 Reading through a notebook with hymns in the Church of God, Newland. Photo by author.

to the next sentence once the previous one has been properly memorized.

What, then, makes Church of God songs different? As other Christian fundamentalists and many Messianic Jews elsewhere in the world, Church of God members view the Word of God as an index of divine truth (Crapanzano 2000; Dulin 2013). Thus, if Pentecostals and Adventists sing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Church of God songs, too, are ultimately created by

God, but in a different method: their content is either copied from the Bible or strictly regulated in order to guarantee that it accurately represents the Word of God as understood in the Church. Church of God elders check and approve new hymns, particularly if these are "imported" from other churches. They verify, for instance, that songs do not include any references to Christmas, Easter or any other "pagan" holidays or symbols like the cross. One of the most popular ways of composing songs, however, is simply copying verses from the Bible. This practice existed among Protestant Nuer and other communities in the region, for decades,[4] but Messianics are much more careful and consistent in following it, and often emphasize that their songs are unique because they are "from the Bible." Copying songs from the Bible is not mandatory according to the Church's doctrine. But it is preferable.

The centrality of biblical texts, it should be noted, is significant also because it echoes a broader political debate about the place of local (Nuer) believers within biblical history. In many Nuer Protestant churches, hymns that make explicit references to contemporary political events are not uncommon. Pleading with Jesus and God for help on behalf of the people of southern Sudan was already a common theme in Christian hymns during the second civil war, for example, with some hymns making explicit references to Sudan (*Thudan*) or "the South" (*Jɨnup*, from the Arabic *Janub*) or drawing parallels between local political developments and biblical narratives. Some recent hymns refer explicitly to the devastation brought by the civil war that broke out in South Sudan in 2013 and the atrocities perpetrated against Nuer. For Church of God members, such praising practices are entirely unacceptable, for they freely deviate from biblical texts. While Church of God hymns feature no references to South Sudan or the Nuer as such, some of them do refer to "the people of Cush" (*jɨ Kuc*), or the "sons of Cush", (*gaat Kuc*), or the "people of the house of Cush" (*jɨ gɔal Kuc*) – the "correct" identity of all South Sudanese according to biblical history as Church of God members understand it. Even such hymns, however, only state about the people of Cush what the Scriptures do, for instance by drawing explicitly on the famous Prophecy Against Cush of Isaiah 18.

Thus, Church of God hymns always have a clear biblical reference. Consider, for example, the following verse from a popular song from the Church of God hymnal. The song comprises of four verses, of which only the first is quoted here. It is usually sung in a very slow tempo, a cappella, but I have also heard it being performed, on special events or celebrations, in a more upbeat, festive tempo. The verse quoted here is based, with several minor additions (marked in bold) and omissions, on verses 1-4 of Psalm 99. In the hymnal, the Nuer word *Kuoth* is used for "God" and in the Nuer Bible it is *Kuoth Nhial*. In practice, Messianics shifted to using the biblical "Yahweh" in hymns:[5]

Liakɛ Yahweh kɛ ɣöö ɛ Kuäär, kä a naath diaal lathɛ kɛ dual! Jɛn cɛ nyuur wi̱i̱ kɔaamdɛ, wi̱i̱ puɑ̱nyni̱ tin te kɛ gɔ̱k. Yahweh – ɛŋa päär kɛ jɛ mɔ? *Yahweh di̱tdɛ kä Dhayɔn kä liak jɛ ɛ döör dial, a kɛ liakɛ ciötdu min di̱i̱t. Kuäär mi bum nhǫ̱ǫk cuŋni, ji̱n ti̱i̱ tiɛɛl kɛ cɑ̱r mi jieek.*
Praise the Lord **for he** is king, and the people tremble! He sits on his throne above the winged creatures. **Yahweh – who equals Him?** The Lord is mighty in Zion and is praised by all the nations, let them praise your great name. Mighty King, lover of righteousness, **you are jealous toward bad thinking**.

Despite their otherwise highly literalist interpretive approach to biblical texts, it is not uncommon for Messianics to introduce slight modifications to verses – as done in this song – when they are transformed into hymns. Authors do not perceive such changes as corrupting the divine truthfulness and indexicality of the text. The written Word of God in the Nuer language – unlike, for example, the Qur'anic word in Arabic, commonly understood to possess an intrinsic divine value in and of itself – is somewhat elastic. Partly, I think, this is because the translated Bible in Nuer is primarily understood as a reference to the 'speech' of God (*Ruac Kuɔth*) that exists outside it. It is also not problematic to construct hymns from non-consecutive verses, and although the Book of Psalms is a popular source for hymns, verses from other books are also commonly used. Even when songs are not based directly on quotes from the Bible, it is still crucial to establish a clear link between their content and specific biblical verses. The important thing is that the words of the song are "based on the Bible." Through song and praise, Church of God members immerse themselves, physically and collectively, in the Word of God, and it is this link with the divine that renders their songs legitimate.

Moreover, despite their sectarian attitude and concerns about "showing off", Church of God members, like other Nuer Protestants, do hold conferences and evangelization campaigns. Arguably their favorite tool for evangelization is the "Bible chart": a large poster with a set of images illustrating some of the key elements of the biblical prophesies on "the coming of God's Kingdom" (*Ben Kuäärä Kuɔth*) from the books of Daniel and Revelation. Underneath each image is a reference to the verse it illustrates, encouraging the spectator to further interrogate the Bible in order to fully grasp its meaning. The poster is based on materials produced by Church of God members in the US, and its illustrations draw on classic dispensationalist visualizations of biblical narratives and prophesies. Church of God youths train in advance in explaining the meaning of the chart vis-à-vis the Bible, to make sure people do not stare at it "for noting" (*baŋ*). During conferences, they march throughout the neighborhood in groups, singing hymns and carrying with them the Bible chart (Figure 12). When going out to preach, they usually hang the Bible chart in a central public area such as one of Newland's

FIG 12
Church of God youths marching through Newland, singing hymns and holding the Bible chart. Photo by author.

main junctions. Curious people soon gather around it, explore the illustrations and take notes, and before long, passionate debates about the Coming Kingdom evolve.

Finally, as its use of synthesizers may have suggested already, the Church of God, too, has not been immune to the influences of Pentecostalism. If the computers and smartphones of committed "Sunday worshippers" in Newland are filled with music videos and sermons of Pentecostals from across the globe, Nuer Messianic youths have been increasingly influenced by the media produced through the fertile conversation between American Messianic Jews and evangelical Christian Zionists. The evangelical Zionist organisations from which Messianics in Gambella draw inspiration are remarkably media savvy, and like many Pentecostal groups, run popular YouTube channels and produce impressive volumes of digital audio-visual materials that are enthusiastically consumed around the world, in addition to self-help books and pro-Israel propaganda. Unsurprisingly, over the past decade, several splinter groups have defected from the Church of God and established new Messianic movements in Gambella, each consequently introducing its own amendments to the aesthetic values and musical practices of the Church. While some have (rather controversially) opened up the space for greater use of upbeat music and synthesizers, others have abandoned these entirely and reverted back to adungus and soft melodies.

Aesthetic Provocations and the Negotiation of Religious Sounds

Tensions between different Christian groups in Newland over songs and sounds have a productive quality. They do not represent mere conflicts or clashes between opposing groups fighting over the domination of public spaces. Rather, it is through provocations, debates and argumentation over the "correct" sounds and aesthetics of Christian worship that born-again subjectivities and communities are continuously negotiated and upheld. The different practices and aesthetics that challenge each other in Gambella represent different logics for the authorization of religious media and its spread into the public sphere. Ceaselessly fluctuating between the Word and the Spirit, self-mastery and spontaneity, sectarianism and evangelical expansion, they can be said to represent different approaches to addressing the paradigmatic Protestant tension between human agency and divine intervention (Keane 2007, 56). Through a wide range of engagements and interconnections and drawing on various influences from across Africa and the world, each of these approaches translates into a different set of practices in Ethiopia's western periphery, representing distinct and yet infinitely dynamic and debatable "sensational forms" that render the divine accessible to believers (Meyer 2011).

While the various practices and aesthetics explored here constantly work to craft Christian groups by drawing people together, the quest for authenticity is ultimately a personal and not a communal endeavour. Its focus is the individual believer and his or her attitudes and sensibilities. What this individual struggle does generate, however, is a public sphere of deliberation and exchange, upheld by ongoing aesthetic provocations that occur both within and beyond the boundaries of any specific church. Like the Islamic "counterpublic" Hirschkind describes, forged by the circulation of cassette sermons in Egypt, the Nuer born-again arena is "both normative and deliberative, a domain for both subjection to authority and the exercise of individual reasoning" (Hirschkind 2006, 140). This arena is therefore "political" in the sense Arendt (1958) ascribes to this term, referring to the interaction between human beings in the public realm. And precisely because the debates that uphold this arena never come to a conclusive end, the institutional authority of any particular church in it is always under duress and so is the cohesion of any supposedly distinct group of believers temporarily brought together by shared aesthetics and practices.

The public sphere configured by born-again media is therefore not static, and the debates explored here can be understood as part of a longer historical conversation about sound and Christian mediation, in which different aesthetic regimes "push back" against one another. Both Adventists and Church of God members often describe the Presbyterian

missionaries who first introduced Christianity to the Nuer as "deceivers", for they have "confused" people by teaching them "false" doctrines. However, the way both groups today seek to clear local religious life from what they consider to be "pagan" practices focused on passion, excitement and false beliefs resembles the struggle of Presbyterian missionaries to reshape the materiality of Nuer spiritual life a century ago, which involved the suppression of ritualistic use of language and other forms of ecstatic worship. Fundamentalist Christians today push back against aesthetic changes introduced to Nuer Protestantism under the influence of Pentecostalism more recently – changes they consider to be the consequence of satanic manipulation and general social "confusion". Naturally, however, upon the rejection of Pentecostal practices and aesthetics, new practices and aesthetics are articulated, which are in turn deemed to be authentic: Establishing the divine indexicality and authenticity of certain religious media entails emphasising the "manufactured" nature of others.

notes and references

[1] The article draws primarily on ethnographic research carried out between October 2018 and September 2019, but also on several shorter visits to the region between 2015 and 2020. Throughout these years I also spent time in Kampala, Uganda, where some of the movements discussed here maintain congregations among Nuer refugees.

[2] I use the term Zionist here to refer to Christian theologies that reject "replacement theology" (or "supersessionism"), that is, the notion that the Christian church has replaced Israel in God's plan for humanity.

[3] While in the US and Israel "Messianic Jews" commonly refers to individuals of Jewish descent who accept Jesus, in Africa the term often refers more broadly to Christian groups that observe various Jewish traditions or customs. See Miles 2019; Gidron 2020a, 118-25.

[4] There are Nuer hymns of "Sunday" churches, too, both old and new, that are based on biblical verses. On the same practice among the Uduk of Sudan's Blue Nile State, see: James, 2007: 234-35.

[5] My translation of the verse into English is based on the Good News Translation, as this is the version that was used to create the Nuer translation of the Bible, but I divert from it where the Nuer version does so too. Marked in bold are phrases that do not appear in the Nuer Bible. I thank Buay Tut for his assistance with the translation of the hymn.

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